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Portraits of Dysfunction in Contemporary Irish Women's Narratives: Confined to the Cell, Lost to Memory

'Wherever there is Ireland there is the Family;
and it counts for a great deal'

—G. K. CHESTERTON

ABSTRACT: The present chapter looks at how dysfunction has been represented in the literature produced by Irish women writers since the 1980s. In the novels under discussion, dysfunction is defined in terms of the disclosure of a traumatic event that originated in the past but requires a retrospective unearthing of the harmfully blocked memories of the characters in the present. In order to illustrate instances of family dysfunction throughout the four decades that feature in this study, eight novels have been selected: Julia O'Faolain's *No Country for Young Men* (1980), Deirdre Madden's *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), Lia Mills' *Another Alice* (1996), Mary O'Donnell's *The Elysium Testament* (1999) Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), Jennifer Johnston's *Foolish Mortals* (2007), Claire Keegan's *Foster* (2010) and Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *You* (2010). In these narratives, child abuse, domestic violence, incest, neglect, unorthodox motherhood, distressful orphanage and, in general, the wrongdoings of familiar upbringing figure prominently. Furthermore, they expose severe critiques at the values commonly alleged to pertain to the nuclear family and engage into the denouncement of outdated patriarchal tenets whose impositions on society have precisely derived into the surfacing of a wide variety of family dysfunctions.

Introduction

That the family has commonly stood as a symbol of unity in most cultures of the Eastern and Western sides of the globe is an undeniable fact, mainly positioned at the service of both the Church and the State as controlling institutions. Undoubtedly, the nuclear family constituted by the father as the breadwinner and the mother as the child bearer, has traditionally functioned as the norm in most Western countries, at least until women started to gain rights and entered the labour market, which happened at different paces and stages of history. In the Irish context, however, even though the religious and political institutions worked together to defend their hegemony sanctioning the structure of the nuclear family from which to vindicate nationalist sacrifices for the cause and Catholic morality (Beale 1987: 8–9; Inglis 1998; Ferriter 2004), the truth is that in the 1950s, Ireland still remained one of the European countries with highest rates of single men and women (Beale 1987: 30; Kennedy 2001: 5). Fintan O'Toole, in an essay entitled 'The Irish Family', has argued that the nuclear family was not a phenomenon so characteristic in Ireland as most people believed (1994: 170) and has been at pains to correct this view affirming that if Ireland was so late in passing a law on divorce it was not because the nuclear family was the cement of society but precisely for the opposite:

We have this notion in our heads that marriage and the family are somehow more sacred to us than to other, more benighted nations. It is a deep untruth, an inaccuracy so grotesque that only the might and authority of the Constitution can conceal it [...]. The nuclear family – Mommy, Daddy and the kids, and they alone, living in one house – is a recent social invention, a product of industrial society [...]. Here, though, because we developed the nuclear family as the norm so late, and because its hold has been in many ways so tenuous, we are only now beginning to face its failures. (1994: 168)

Considering these circumstances, the initial chapter of this monograph on the representation of the dysfunctional family in contemporary Irish literature will focus on how women writers have constructed different

notions of such entity, contending that their role challenging traditional views of motherhood, unearthing taboo subjects and mainly denouncing abuses within the (patriarchal) order has been as outstanding as underestimated. From this perspective, it is my intention to contribute, if only at a small scale, to compensate for the gender imbalance that emerges in so many anthologies, monographs and general literary readings, which mainly showcase the male perspective as the norm. If, according to Maggie Humm, '[t]hrough representations we shape our identities and our worlds', we need female representations of the world because they conform more than half of it – if not more. Contending that the gender approach is not just an additional framework but a form to 'centralize women's experiences of sexuality, work and the family', Humm defends such ideological position as an unquestioned model from which the interpretation of reality will inevitably be challenged (2004: 46). Accordingly, to pay attention to how women writers have built their own pictures of dysfunctional patterns occurring within the domestic sphere will help historicize changes that have affected Irish society in the last decades.

For mere matters of chronology and limits of space, eight authors and novels have been selected for this discussion, highlighting four decades of women writing. Starting with the 1980s, Julia O'Faolain's *No Country for Young Men* (1980) and Deirdre Madden's *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988) will expose intergenerational family dysfunctional patterns. In these texts, violence, emotional deficits or the burden of keeping secrets and lies, which have been interiorized and normalized as a result of faulty upbringings, will surface as wounds that will be repeated throughout history, since memory is shared collectively. In the following decade, Lia Mills' *Another Alice* (1996) and Mary O'Donnell's *The Elysium Testament* (1999) will showcase how the effects of abject parenthood, including incest and deep pain, can trigger the pursuit of psychological recovery through various therapeutic mechanisms. In the two cases, the need of mothering outside existing harmful conducts paves the way for the protagonists to find an alternative path. As the threshold of the new millennium, the analysis of Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) and Jennifer Johnston's *Foolish Mortals* (2007) aims at rendering how the term dysfunction has sometimes been too loosely employed. While Enright's novel delves into the dramatic

consequences of child molestation, a taboo subject that had scandalized Irish society and was usually kept as a disgrace within the family domain, Johnston's work was reviewed as an instance of an Irish dysfunctional household, merely because it proposed alternative family configurations that included homosexuality and cross-dressing. This reveals how dysfunctional families should not be confused with unconventional or unstructured family units. Finally, to illustrate the writing produced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I have picked two short novels that construct family life and dysfunction from the perspective of (female) childhood. Two young girls are the protagonist-narrators that portray their own experiences in Claire Keegan's *Foster* (2010) and Nuala Ní Chonchúir's *Yeu* (2010). In both cases, unconventional family configurations are presented as the solution to other ineffective forms of nurture in which children are sometimes used as commodities, easily exchanged and managed by adults.

All in all, the dysfunctional family should be seen as the 'other' in society which, according to Deborah Chambers, responds to the fact that a

modern functional family cannot operate effectively as a regulatory ideal without inventing the idea of being under siege from deeply disruptive forces. The dysfunctional family, and its individual members, act as a counterfoil, as a permanent reminder of the need to fight for the preservation of the ideal as something more than a myth, as something that once existed and that must be recovered. This pathological form signifies the demise of the 1950s male breadwinner model and the rise of postmodern instability, diversity and deviation. The nuclear family is invented and reinvented, and kept alive in political rhetoric and fiction through endless mobilization against the perils of dysfunctionality. The middle-class white nuclear family may be a figment of the public imagination, but it has come to stand for something beyond itself: moral purity and goodness. It has come to represent something that *ought* to exist. (2001: 66)

Considering these circumstances, and focusing on the abovementioned novels, child abuse, domestic violence, incest, neglect, unorthodox motherhood, distressful orphanage and the wrongs of familiar upbringing stand out prominently. Most of them succeed in challenging received expectations of motherhood, offering models that refuse to domesticate female figures and question the existence of a natural maternal instinct that is inherent to the female gender. Moreover, they exhibit severe critiques of

the values commonly alleged to pertain to the nuclear family, and engage into the denouncement of outdated patriarchal tenets, whose cultural impositions have precisely derived into the surfacing of a wide variety of family dysfunctions.

The Irish (Nuclear) Family throughout History

One of the reasons that has been put forward to explain why the Irish family has historically operated as a signifier of unity and morality, even though reality did not respond to this ideal, is to be found in the Irish State and its endorsement of Catholic mores that would eventually hearten values of identity and nationhood. In fact, even though a high rate of spinsterhood has been amply documented in Ireland, its representation in the literature of the period has always been negative and, as Ann Wan-lih Chang has demonstrated, 'indicate[s] continuing social marginalization and discrimination which this distinctive (single women) group experiences as a result of falling outside of the conventional social enclosure in Ireland' (2015: 45). Considering that '[l]and, family and Church formed a trinity which dominated much of Irish life at least until the 1960s' (Kennedy 2001: 6), the concept of the family was thus established as a 'natural' symbol of national harmony and religious morality, and was legalized in the Irish Constitution of 1937. Article 41.2 not only placed women under male control, it relegated them to the domestic sphere and to motherhood.¹ Women were, thus, made responsible for the education of their children in accordance to the morals of a reactionary society in which divorce, abortion or homosexuality would be severely persecuted and penalized by the State. Under the Marriage Bar,

The construction of the family as a natural and hierarchical order in the Irish Constitution, as Kennedy has noted, was informed by *Framework of a Christian Stage* (1932), an influential book written by the Reverend Edward Cahill – who was close to de Valera – whose definition of the family has been quoted in the opening of this book.

women had to abandon their jobs as soon as they married, and could only contribute to family subsistence through farm labour. Such practice was preserved throughout the first half of the twentieth as a result of Ireland's rural-based economy and of women's lack of independence. The system of the family cell turned out to be successful in as much as it represented, as Conrad has explained,

a social structure that was firmly established and self-regulating; manipulation of that discourse was an effective means of control and reproduction, both literally and figuratively, of the social order. It is not surprising, then, that it remained as an idealized structure in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish nationalist *and* [sic] unionist discourse and eventually was enshrined as the cornerstone of the new Irish nation-state. (2004: 10)

It was not until the early 70s when new possibilities for women started to emerge. The entrance of Ireland in the European Economic Community in 1972 had significant repercussions. It did not only contribute to the opening up of frontiers that had kept the country isolated and dependent on Britain for so long, it further involved an advance in rights through the implementation of new legislations, including employment equality. The Marriage Bar was lifted in 1975 and women started to work in new industries that had introduced modern manufacturing machinery. However, the changes were slow and kept to a minimum (Beale 1987: 9–10). As writer Nuala Ní Chonchúir described in her essay, 'Memoirs', during the late 70s and 80s:

Ireland was a late-blossoming place: [...] a young woman writer was more likely to be getting married and starting a family, than weaving flowers in her hair and indulging in free love. She may also have been reading a diet of older works, mostly written by men. Our society was repressed by both State and church, and women's sexuality was ignored, at best. Single mothers were locked away in institutions, for example, and contraception was illegal. (2012: 73)

The 1980s opened a decade in which religious conservatism and the preservation of the values of the nuclear family as an institution protected by the State began to be publicly questioned. Contraception was legalized in 1979, although only for married couples, and in 1983 and 1986 referenda

banned abortion and divorce, respectively (Parker 2009: 6). Little by little, women started to gain more legal rights that allowed them to work and educate themselves, and to be less dependent on men. The implementation of new laws was subsequently accompanied by changes, though still minor, in societal expectations for women. As Owens Weekes has detailed, not only discrimination in law started to be amended, also 'the patriarchal bias [was] redressed' with the establishment of the Council for the Status of Women, which surveyed that women were paid equally, that they had the right to paid maternity leave and that they could claim supplementary familiar allowances (2000: 104). However, these achievements were not seconded by an advance in the liberal ethos of the country.

The 1990s were defined by contradiction as regards ethical values and new regulations. The election of Mary Robinson as President of the Irish Republic in 1990 was indisputably one of the most relevant moves towards the liberation of women. Divorce was legalized in 1995, homosexuality was decriminalized in the Republic in 1993, and lone mothers, same-sex couples, one-parent families and alternative family re-configuration, which had not been socially acceptable so far, came 'out of the closet'.² Nevertheless, even though there were socio-political vindications that strived to approve less discriminatory rights for men and women, a number of sexual scandals, physical abuse, paedophilia, illegitimate children and other deceitful practices that members of the Catholic Church had exerted in educational institutions came to the public fore. Adding to this, the reclusion of thousands of lone mothers – the so-called 'dishonest' women – who had been silenced for decades, became a source of social and political shame.³ As a consequence, the well-known 'X Files/Case' – later fictionalized by Edna O'Brien in her novel *Down the River* (1996), in which a fourteen-year-old victim of rape was not allowed to travel to the UK for an abortion – as well as heated controversy over the selling of contraceptives,⁴ clandestine abortions

² See Pérez Vides (2003) and O'Sullivan (2007), for further information.

³ See Inglis (1998) and James M. Smith (2007), for further research into the subject.

⁴ As referred above, they were only available for married couples, which placed Ireland as the last country in Europe to legalize them (Kennedy 2001: 4).

and abandoned babies entered the literary and critical agendas of writers. With the upsurge of female power and control of their lives and bodies, the demands of a more equal society and the need to disclose and face taboo issues, the thematization of such long-regarded banned subjects – which had been kept enclosed within the private sphere of the caged family – became a pressing demand. Thus, the debate over the notion of the family itself became central in the public discourse of a nation that was in need of revising the pillars that sustained its national and moral identity, for which such institution had been erected as its most valuable asset.

These circumstances coincided with an unprecedented economic boom that was transforming the country into an attractive place for entrepreneurs and international investors, as well as for immigrants and political refugees, who discovered an opportunity to start a new life in Ireland.⁵ On the one hand, the volatile economy of this period and the advantageous fiscal policies were responsible for the technological advances, foreign investment and the globalization of the country. On the other, these transnational forces consequently brought the modernization of the country, in terms of its productive richness, the improvement of the quality of life and the inevitable alteration of social values. For these reason, Kennedy has contended that 'changes in family patterns have been driven by economic factors which, when they gained sufficient strength, tended to outweigh those of tradition and religion. Policy and institutional changes were frequently introduced to accommodate choice already made by the people' (2001: 240). Therefore, at the beginning of the new millennium, the equation of the hegemony of the family with the conservative identity of the nation was not only challenged but overturned. The beginning of the twenty-first century also initiated the downfall of the Celtic Tiger, as a number of politicians and economists had presaged. The collapse of the Irish economy, the unparalleled social transformations and the not so positive effects of such phenomenon soon emerged in the literature produced at the time, which significantly engaged in the denunciation of different

forms of abuse within the household and proposed alternative ways of looking at the family structure, as I will have the opportunity to illustrate throughout the analysis of the novels discussed.

Women Writing from the 1980s to the Present

The 1980s: Julia O'Faolain's No Country for Young Men (1980) and Deirdre Madden's The Birds of the Innocent Wood (1988)

Julia O'Faolain's most celebrated *No Country for Young Men* (1980)⁶ is a complex and enigmatic novel, whose richness lie in two interweaved plots that deal with several members of the same family and with their doomed repetition of dysfunctional patterns of behaviour during the Troubles of the 1920s and 70s.⁷ The narrative centres on the production of a propaganda film about the US intervention in the fight for Irish freedom during the revolutionary 1920s. With the cliché title of *Four Green Fields*, echoing W. B. Yeats' nationalist play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), the film attempts to nostalgically recreate the life of the Irish-American hero Sparky Driscoll, a fund-raiser who was apparently killed by Orangemen in an ambush in the North of Ireland. A second North American, James Duffy, is sent to Ireland in the late 70s to convey this research and interview people related

See in this regard studies by Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin (2002), Kuhling and Keohane (2007), and Bradley and Kennelly (2008), respectively.

- 6 Short-listed in Britain for the Booker Prize, *No Country for Young Men* has been approached from the most diverse perspectives, including an original comparison with *Finnegans Wake* (O'Connor 1996). See Owens Weekes (1986) for an analysis of the underlying myth of Diarmuid and Grainne; Van Dale (1991) for a study on the development of Judith as a 'revolutionary' character; Mahony (1995) for an assessment of the role of women; Moore (1991) for an exploration of triangular relationships in the novel; St. Peter (1994) for a consideration of the relationship between sexism and nationalism; and Garrat for the relationship between trauma and history (2011).
- 7 A previous, much longer version of a discussion of this novel as a historical tragicomic nightmare can be found in Morales-Ladrón (2005).

to the Troubles. Sister Judith provides the link between the two historical dates. She played a more than relevant role in the story of Sparky and was, therefore, silenced through internment in a convent and electroshock treatment. Her struggle to give sense to the fragmented memories of a traumatic past fifty-five years later will be O'Faolain's pretext to connect the two triangular failed love affairs that take place in both plots, 'reveal[ing] a paradigm of control and entrapment of women throughout Irish history' (Moore 1991: 9) and, moreover, replicating an oppressive familiar order. The two stories end dramatically with the unheroic deaths of the outsiders. However, the real truth about the murder is only revealed in the last pages, when an objectified vision of history has been erased so as to fit into the Republican nationalist myth of the blood sacrifice for (Mother) Ireland; that is, when the female voice has once again been disempowered and annihilated.⁸

The novel succeeds in challenging the authority of history as documented truth and exposes the mechanisms involved in the creation of alternative myths that are made to supplant factual history – here a mere construct. History, both in the macro structural sense and in the micro divisional unit of the family, is presented as a cycle that will be repeated *ad infinitum*. Violence, secrets and lies become the necessary mechanisms for the perpetuation of dysfunction within the family order, through the interiorization of intergenerational patterns of communication that erase women from any story worthy of being accounted for. Similar to the following novel of this discussion, Madden's *The Birds of the Innocent wood*, women are trapped in and by their own (in)articulated stories. The two novels reproduce a time when women's roles were relegated to the domestic

sphere – although home was considered a 'male territory' (O'Faolain 1987: 20) – when their lives were devoted to back up men, especially in times of war, and when they were no more than invisible agents. Even though in both narratives the fate of two generations of women is placed at a prominent position, they end dramatically since characters get caught in a historical nightmare that is bound to echo itself.

In O'Faolain's case, the double temporality of the narration and the dislocated discourses that merge the stories of the characters with historical records, letters, Irish myths and endless intertextual references turn its reading into a puzzle-solving exercise. As if emasculating Judith, who has 'a gap in her brain: a hole?' (O'Faolain 1987: 8), the reader has to fill in the gaps of the text discriminating fiction from reality, while the novel raises questions about the nature of history and of each one's personal story, specially of women. Judith's frightening repetitive dreams for more than fifty years about death, violence and blood, and the response of her family impel her to believe that 'she had done some dreadful thing' (O'Faolain 1989: 286). But she is torn between wishing to remember and fearing a past that brings images of a family divided by activist Republicanism and excessive secrecy. Trapped in history, onto two 'Judiths' (9), her last nightmare will let her glimpse the truth: that she murdered Sparky because he had convinced her sister Kathleen to leave Owen and escape to the United States and, moreover, because he was going to report back home an ideological breach between the Irish, which basically meant that US funding to buy arms would be cut off. At precisely the moment when Judith adds this last piece to the puzzle, the violent death of James – who had already discovered it and was ready to fly back to the United States with Grainne – takes place, leaving Judith, a mentally unbalanced woman, as the only witness. On allowing history to repeat itself, the novel suggests that truth will be manipulated once again to accommodate a nationalist myth that erases whatever might challenge nationalist agendas. It is Larry, the film producer, who warns James:

Even if your nutty nun's got the truth, we don't want it.
[...] This is a Republican film, remember? To raise funds, right? In America. We do not want to show Republicans murdering an American fund-raiser.
[...] We are constructing a myth, [...]. We don't give a goddam about truth. It does not set you free. It dissipates energies. Myths unify. (O'Faolain 1987: 320)

8 Although apparently these two North Americans travel to Ireland with the intention of tightening Irish-American relations, a further parallel is established in the way they are caught up in the Irish patriarchal order. While they both seduce a woman who is either engaged or married to an Irishman and presuppose that they will be able to take the women back to their country, they cannot but end up dramatically. Sparky, who did not sympathize with war or violence, becomes a martyr of the Irish cause when the Republicans use the Orangemen as scapegoats, and James is killed when he finds out the truth of Sparky's death.

However, Judith is not the only character that experiences nightmares. In fact, Kathleen admits that everyone in the family suffers them, as if they worked as antidotes against madness. Bearing such a nationalist name, it is not surprising to find out that Kathleen took an active part during the war, hiding arms, money and gunmen in the house. Due to this involvement, she is also the only one prepared to demystify the heroism of the cause, abandon her oppressive country, her activist fiancé Owen, and move to the more liberal USA with Sparky. Nevertheless, Kathleen, an icon taken from a myth, cannot rid herself of her fate, and is finally swallowed by the ideology she represents. As an embodiment of (Mother) Ireland, she will have no choice but marry Owen and bear seven children, one of whom will follow in his father's footsteps. Not only Kathleen's hopes for a better future vanish, she is also silenced in a text that triggers her disappearance as a character. Not surprisingly, the story of Kathleen finds a parallel in that of Grainne five decades later. Divided, on the one hand, between what society expects from her as a good housekeeper, wife and mother, and her personal desires, and, on the other, between her 'frigid' husband Michael (O'Faolain 1987: 155) and her passionate lover James, she also has nightmares: 'Seeing things partly with James's and partly with Michael's eyes, she felt herself into a hybrid, a double-visioned-creature who had to keep sorting herself out' (242). Furthermore, as Robert F. Garrat explains, Grainne is under such strong masculine domination that she 'decries the way women, specially married women, are restricted by the new Irish government, socially and politically' (2011: 46). Consequently, what makes both history and each one's stories turn into nightmares is not the Troubles themselves but the recurrence of the dysfunctional family patterns that disables them to deal with them. The silencing of women is most effective in the case of Judith, through her endless attempts to be heard and convince people that there is a secret of national importance hidden somewhere in her mind – a 'buried trauma' (O'Faolain 1987: 10). No doubt, everyone takes her as mentally unstable. The big irony lies in the fact that she is continually telling the truth, one that is difficult to believe considering that she is only a woman living in a patriarchal society. This explains why the chaplain will see her

confessions as part of female imagination, that of a 'sexually unstable' (269) nun who suffers from 'suppressed sex' (89).⁹

Therefore, in the novel, the Troubles are not a mere historical reference but a metaphor for the troubled and nightmarish lives these protagonists lead. All characters and events taking place in the 1920s are re-enacted in the 1970s evidencing how there has been no evolution in history or in the family structure. As the title of the novel suggests, evoking and revising Yeats' famous line in his poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1926), by the late 70s 'the Irish Republic is a country by and for old men' (St. Peter 1994: 152), a country that maintains the old values that fed the past in a stagnant present and dormant future. The pessimistic ending is substantiated by the lack of positive characters, of liberating forces that might triumph introducing change and evolution. The author fails to provide an alternative to such oppression of the past, especially that exercised on women, which seems to be bound to be repeated once and again. Garrat goes as far as to affirm that the plot of the novel 'dramatically reveals how the present generation acts out the behaviour of its predecessors, giving us a neat illustration of Freud's primary condition of traumatic neurosis, the compulsion to repeat' (2011: 37). In O'Faolain's revision of myth and history, there is no place for subversion since Grainne's transgressive decision to exchange husband and son for lover is finally invalidated with the death of the latter. While the nationalist Republican myth of the blood sacrifice projected by the leaders of the Easter Rising is deflated in the hands of those who were not ready to die but rather to kill in the name of Ireland, the author perpetuates another myth that will hook women to a history of silence and oppression.

Dysfunctional intergenerational patterns also recur in Deirdre Madden's *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988). Madden's work addresses questions connected with trauma, loss and identity from a variety of angles. Leaving aside those that direct or indirectly engage with the Troubles,

9 Noticeably, the two murderers in the novel seem to have a repressed sexual life. In the case of Judith, she rejects Sparky after he had kissed her not out of dislike but rather because her body had turned uncontrollably wild (O'Faolain 1987: 260). Patsy Flynn, on the other hand, is a convinced bachelor who 'had never touched a female' (265), hates women and despises sex.

her novels tend to focus on the psychological conflicts that, one way or another, lead characters to an incessant and often infructuous search for a sense of life. Memory figures largely in her works, in the form of how characters use this psychological construct to come to terms with their (often) troubled pasts. *The Birds* delves into the lives of two generations of women, doomed to failure as a result of faulty upbringings and emotional deficits. Like O'Faolain's, the novel is set in two temporal realms, and is told retrospectively with continuous whirls of time that move from the exploration of the psychological damage originated in Jane's traumatic orphanage to the internalized symptoms of such distress experienced by her twin daughters, Sarah and Catherine, years after her death. With a seemingly chronic inability to communicate, all characters conceal disturbing or painful secrets from each other, contributing to create a gloomy atmosphere of discomfort and distrust that appends them to their impending pasts. Reviewed as a 'dark and disturbing story of twin sisters whose lives are haunted by the sinister presence of their dead mother' (Kelly 1996: 157), the narrative finally comes to suggest that the burden of unresolved conflicts in the past can be projected onto the lives not only of the next akin but of the following generations.

The premature death of Jane's parents, at the age of two, her long periods spent in hospital, her unwilling adoption by an aunt and her final internment in a convent boarding school at the age of five are upsetting experiences from which the protagonist tries to detach through cruelty and coldness. The suppression of painful memories from her mind – at some point she feels that everything has blackened out – and the fabrication of alternative dreadful stories around her life are mere defence mechanisms she holds on to cope with trauma and pain.¹⁰ Jane uses her past as a means and as a weapon to traumatize others, while she victimizes herself. Thus,

10 She, in fact, could easily make the case for a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane define as the 'inability to integrate the reality of particular experiences and the resulting repetitive replaying of the trauma in images, behaviours, feelings, physiological states and interpersonal relations' (1996: 487). See also Ruth Leys, who affirms that '[p]ost-traumatic stress disorder is fundamentally a disorder of memory' (2000: 2).

she imparts such romanticism to the drama of her life that she likes to think of her past in terms of fiction. With an easiness to transform her symptomatic affective deficits into frightening stories, she develops a special ability to impressing and tormenting other children that, as she discovers, empowers her:

She loved manipulating the other little girls. Every time she told her story she felt as if she was leading the unsuspecting children to a vast black pit, and when she had taken them right to the edge, she would suddenly draw back and abandon them there. She craved their pity and their sense of horror; and at the same time she utterly despised the other little girls for allowing her to induce these feelings in them. It was her tragedy, and she was never so weak as to cry for the loss of her parents. (Madden 1988: 5)

The denial of the past through the erasure of memories will be Jane's *modus operandi*. When her first baby dies, she decides to burn all the clothes so that the only proof of his existence is a birth and a death certificate. As metaphor for the stagnation of the past, a sense of immobility and paralysis runs through the whole novel, manifested not only in the setting, but also in the lives of the characters. Before marriage, Jane finds both her job in town and her life tedious and repetitive. She then moves with her husband to a remote rural area, isolated from everyone else, a place unable to accommodate variation and where she feels 'she was caught in a space and a stillness which was beyond time, so every tick was not another second, but the same second repeated, and repeated' (Madden 1988: 20). Furthermore, in their honeymoon, she accepts to spend some days in the same old, shabby hotel of a fishing village, where his parents spent their own honeymoon, symbolically installing patterns of repetition and recurrence in her life. Against the quietness of the farm, unscathed by change, Jane strongly perceives and fears the wilderness of nature, finding it 'implacable, uncompromising, cruel: something which could not be contained or controlled' (47). Being a city girl, she only accepts the hardness of country life through John's proposal, a man she barely knows, as it is her only opportunity to escape from her psychological seclusion. Her dreams reveal a fear of loneliness that turns alarming when she starts to experience physical symptoms, sharp pains with no apparent cause, which even make her faint on one occasion. However, through marriage, she is also ironically conforming to societal expectations

on women, as she joyfully notices how the girls at the office envy her. As Jerry White has affirmed discussing the novel, 'its political import clearly lies in how it centralizes the way women were repressed by an inflexible culture' (1999: 453).

Years later, after Jane's death, the reader is confronted with the distressing lives of her twin daughters. Although very dissimilar, the two have drawn on dysfunctional emotional means with which to deal with pain, loss and grief, feeling dead alive: 'Death had not been a presence, then, but a lack: lack of family, lack of love, lack of a real home' (Madden 1988: 75). On the one hand, Sara enjoys the isolation of their farmland but struggles against the passage of time that traps her in the routine of an existence without past or future. Sara, who takes after her mother, will re-enact her same distrust for people and will defend herself against loneliness through the battlement of her emotions: 'All her life, Sarah now saw, had been an unconscious struggle against her mother, for she had been afraid that she would grow up to be just like her: just as cold, just as calculating and just as self-contained' (31). On the other hand, Catherine does not seem to have any sense of the past and therefore keeps a diary to exercise her memory, even though at times she wishes she could do without concealed memories that torment her. In fact, she fears to be blamed one day for 'be[ing] the one who allowed time to repeat things which are wrong' (86). All members of the family share their need to keep secrets, including the father, who had concealed from everyone else that the woman living next door was his half-sister.

With a similar pessimistic tone to O'Faolain's novel, *The Birds* finally plays around the ideas of death, grief and loss, real or metaphorical, and with the menace of a cyclical history that keeps repeating. The narrative also examines different sources of trauma that have been internalized across generations, and especially the upsetting effects of orphanage. Drama is, thus, inherent to the family in the forms of suicide, stillbirth, terminal illness and even incest. If in *The Birds* the narrative starts with the death of Jane's parents, closure will be brought through Catherine's impending death, who had symbolically felt that her life had ended the moment she was rejected to enter the convent, even though religion was 'no comfort to her, but a torment' (Madden 1988: 92). Through the exploration of two

generations of female characters within the same family, Madden finally comes to denounce how their lives were stuck to patterns of social deprivation within a suffocating patriarchal context and how they were bound to replicate their own dysfunctional emotional lives. As if these women were unaffected by the more liberal changes brought by modernity and the challenge of alternative modes of living, such realm is eventually extinguished by an oppressive nature that swallows them up.

The 1990s: Lia Mills' Another Alice (1996) and Mary O'Donnell's The Elysium Testament (1999)

The 1990s were controversial and difficult times in Ireland with sexual scandals, domestic violence and child molestation coming to the fore of public affairs for the first time and occupying the headlines of the news and national newspapers.¹¹ Targeting to challenge the uncontested values of the hegemonic Catholic (nuclear) family, a fresh group of novels that tackled taboo subjects and unearthed various kinds of trauma and abuse became available, among which we could include John McGahern's *Amongst Women* (1990), Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992), Edna O'Brien's *Down By the River* (1996) or Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1997). Timely published, Lia Mill's *Another Alice* (1996) undertook the theme of incest, which had for long occupied a secret and private space within the realm of the family, and dealt with it openly in the form of an urgent social and moral responsibility that impinged upon all institutions. The family, in fact, together with gender issues and with the idea of the nation, according to Gerry Smyth, turned into 'central concerns' at the time (1997: 93). In Mill's novel, as

¹¹ Very graphically, Mills has explained how difficult it was to be a woman in those years: 'We had a series of high-profile sexual abuse and rape cases, a number of women were murdered; it was the year of the X-case. There was so much opinion flying around they practically had to divert air-traffic away from the country, to avoid disaster. Personal opinion, private opinion, loud public opinion and professional, judicial and legislative opinion. It was everywhere' (qtd. by González-Arias 2011: 115).

in all the others that have delved into such an appalling subject,¹² family dysfunction centres on violent fathers and on how their misbehaviour was commonly sanctioned by a silent society as much as by abject mothers. Divided into three parts, the story of *Another Alice* is told retrospectively and makes abundant use of discontinuous time shifts that highlight the excruciating efforts of the protagonist in her struggle to remember. In the novel, psychotherapy emerges as the only means through which Alice can traverse her past, unlocking wounded memories and making sense of a fragmented self that had been broken into pieces and buried under the trauma of child molestation and rape. Moreover, Alice's need to transform her dysfunctional upbringing into a positive experience places the mother bond at the core of the healing process, since it is her fear to transfer and project her interiorized patterns of a damaged childhood onto her own daughter what triggers her need to work through her past, reroute her present and build a future.

Throughout the novel, Alice carries a heavy burden that finds its origin in a damaged past and is further intensified by a distressful silence that she had built as a protection against such unbearable pain. Suicidal and even murderous at times, when the adult Alice enters into a depression, 'so deep it seemed infinite' (Mills 1996: 182), she senses something wrong that she cannot recall might have happened during childhood. Confiding in her friend Nell, she admits that she used to think she was unsound while she now suspects there is something else: 'It's like... [sic]. I knew, and didn't know, what it was [...]. Everyone acted as if there was nothing going on, nothing wrong, but I knew. I had to pretend not to. I cut it off' (265–6). Alice's resistance to unleash her emotions is presented in the narrative in the form of cumbersome silences that come to signify what cannot be named. The unspeakable as the signifier of the repetitive sexual abuses during her childhood is so traumatic that appalling memories have been buried in her

mind and remain unrecoverable; a defence mechanism that protects her from distress. As Ruth Leys has explained, 'the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories. The experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present' (2000: 2). In spite of such history of violence perpetrated at an early age, the ending of the novel is remarkably uplifting considering that it will be Alice's daughter the one that will trigger her pressing need to come to terms with her past and to break with the interiorized patterns of abject motherhood that had moulded her.

Another Alice powerfully opens with an understatement that only makes full sense as the novel unfolds. The protagonist tells Ruth, her psychotherapist, that her life is 'too [...] ordinary' (Mills 1996: 1). Not only the reverse will be the case, the narration further points at how abuses perpetrated by members of the family or close friends were commonplace in a society that opted to turn to the other side and keep silent. The denial of such visibility from public knowledge is precisely the origin of Alice's lack of a language or a means to grasp the full significance of what is happening. In her first session with Ruth, she recalls how she could barely hint at such possibility: 'I think ... [sic] I may have been abused. When I was a child' (248). As the narrative progresses, the reader and Alice discover almost simultaneously how it wasn't only her father who had continuously raped her but that she had been sexually assaulted on several other occasions. At only seven, when she was staying for a few days with friends of her mother, Alice turns into an object of desire for the father of the host family, who justifies his advances by declaring that she is 'a sexy little thing' (64). The author's sturdy critique of how society passively tolerated such offence is reflected here in the dumb reaction of the mother who, like Alice's own, did not dare to interfere with male affairs neither knew how to confront such uncomfortable issue.

The triumph of that repressive system surfaces in the novel through Alice's mute sessions. Being unable to verbalize her sorrow, except through panic attacks, these turn into the voiced symptoms of her wounds. As an invisible object, Alice is affected by terrifying nightmares and irrational

12 Other writers of her generation who have also explored such issue with different degrees of intensity are Dorothy Nelson's *Night's City* (1982), Patrick McCabe's *Winterwood* (2006) and some short stories by authors Leland Baldwin, Mary Dorsey and Claire Keegan. For further analysis of this theme, see St. Peter's article on incest narratives (2000).

fears that her unsympathetic mother – who often accused her of ‘laziness and defiance’ (Mills 1996: 85) – used to sooth with hot milk and whiskey; a forewarning of her eventual addiction to drugs and alcohol. Such re-enactment of her trauma, through repetitive flashes of memory, also inscribe on her fragmented and self-abstract body. On one occasion, when she is under the abstinence syndrome, she looks at herself in a mirror and finds in shock her ‘other’ self, who looked familiar but was unconnected to her. This returned image embodies the denial of her story – of her past – and of herself – her future. It additionally elicits the many times when, after her father had abused her, she would run a hot bath to peel her layers of skin out, so that she could abandon her body and be completely absent from life, to become invisible again.¹³ As Laurie Vickroy has explained, writers who deal with trauma ‘make the suffering body the small, focused universe of the tormented and a vehicle for rendering unimaginable experience tangible to readers’ (2002: 33). For this reason, Alice describes how such self-inflicted pain revealed: ‘The anger of my body [...]. A secret cannibal, self-devouring’ (271). And this, indeed, is the antidote against the unbearable acknowledgement of nobody ever noticing anything. In a clear allusion to Eavan Boland’s evocative poem ‘Anorexia’, Alice’s need to keep so thin, to get rid of her female curves ‘that makes you a target’ (280), turns into the symptom of her wish to disappear, so that she would stop being a sexual object.

However, Alice’s troubles do not end with the death of his father, who unexpectedly disappears when he goes swimming into the sea. In fact, his absence from the text induces the narrator to unfold his story, that of a man affected by mental breakdowns, depression, alcoholism and paranoia, treated by a psychiatrist, who reports his suicidal tendencies to Alice. Unfortunately, such an account prompts a softening effect on the reader

as regards his appalling and inexcusable sexual crimes.¹⁴ As Alice expresses later, no matter how unbalanced he might have been, her father made her feel defenceless. Images of him as a predator, for instance, are recurrent in the narrative and become so unbearable for Alice that she can only reconcile them with his idea of a father by deceiving herself into the belief that he is not her ‘Daddy’, that ‘the bad man who comes. He looks like Daddy, but he’s not’ (Mills 1996: 342). On the contrary, the death of her mother, whom Alice had at times wished to kill, produces a ‘hunger in her, an emptiness that no amount of drinking could fill’ (151), to such an extent that she is irrationally driven to become a mother herself. This spanking mother-daughter bond, triggered by a dysfunctional upbringing, will indeed turn into Alice’s second opportunity to undo her life and redo it all over again. Talking to Nell, who insists that ‘[c]hildren need two parents and a stable home’, basically what Alice had, she wisely disparages her for ‘talk[ing] in clichés’ (159). Alice’s rejection of the nuclear family model as the functional institution *per se* will allow her to subvert received assumptions about single mothering, transforming her dysfunctional upbringing into an opportunity to raise her daughter as a sensible lone parent: ‘Through an imaginary lens, she watched herself mothering Holly. As she watched, she became more like the kind of mother she wanted to be’ (199).

It is precisely the very act of mothering, away from the replication of his parent’s misbehaviours, what triggers Alice’s blocked recollection of how rape used to occur. The peeling of the different layers of meanings that she had constructed around the painful events pave her way to the confrontation of another truth: that it was not just his father; she had been the object of another brutal sexual assault by a young man that she had met at a wedding when she was sixteen. Doubtful of whether it was rape or not, because she had too much to drink and felt responsible, she did not report it. Once again, society proves unhelpful and permissive of male uncontrolled desires since her friend Nell blames her for being

13 In fact, the metaphor of the different layers that conform identity is significant for Mills, who has claimed that her challenge writing this novel ‘was about how to bring together the various layers of Alice’s understanding of who she is. How would she discover and tell her story when it was only available to her in fragments, the most urgent of which had always been denied? And how could she live her life until she gathered the different layers together and accepted them?’ (González-Arias 2011: 114).

14 Linden Peach has been clear in this respect, arguing – in the line of Foucault – that the mentally ill occupy a liminal position in society, both threatening and benefiting from it (2004: 177).

'a really seductive little kid' (Mills 1996: 266) and suggests that she is too imaginative.¹⁵ No wonder, Alice has no other choice but to 'wipe it out of her mind. It wasn't like that. It never happened' (224). In a similar case to Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, Alicia and Paula Spencer are not only victims of father and husband, respectively, but also of the failure of the institutions – including the school system, the church, the health care or the family – that, through their inaction, make them invisible and vulnerable.¹⁶ In the two instances, motherhood saves them from a life destined to recur into patterns of interiorized dysfunction. What's more, *Another Alice* ends with a symbolic baptism. In the enactment of her rebirth, Alice puts cold water on her body to counteract the boiling baths she used to take to punish herself as a child.

Coincidentally, water is also a cathartic element in the following novel of this discussion, Mary O'Donnell's *The Elysium Testament* (1999), whose ending places the protagonist in a freezing river, ready to take a bath and allow the pain of her past dissolve into the clear water. Published within three years of each other, O'Donnell's *The Elysium* bears striking similarities with Mill's novel, although it looks at the issue of abject motherhood through the lenses of dysfunctional parenthood. Loss and unresolved grief are the motives inspiring a narration that positions the mother at the centre of a potential danger for her child and as a threat to the stability of the household.¹⁷ However, as the story develops, parental irresponsibility is both shared with the father and condemned. Roland, a four-year-old child, is afflicted by an illness, a bizarre form of epilepsy, for which nobody seems to have an accurate explanation. Far from being comforted by his inattentive parents, he becomes utterly vulnerable in the hands of a harassing mother obsessed with her work and an absent father. It is a cruel irony of destiny that

15 As McMahon has explained: 'A victim of sexual assault tends to agonise over aspects of his or her behaviour and often feels he or she may have contributed to the attack' (2000: 113).

16 For a detailed discussion of Doyle's novel in terms of domestic violence and other gender issues, see Morales-Ladrón (2007).

17 As McMahon explains: 'While people's reactions to loss are universal, each individual's reactions to the grieving process are unique' (2000: 87).

the child is eventually killed in an accident while at her mother's working place, the source of her distress as much as the result of it. Told retrospectively in the form of a journal, Nina, the suicidal protagonist, is involved in the writing of a Testament addressed to her husband. Throughout the writing process, the unbearable trauma and sorrow unleash her blotted emotions. The resulting narration thus springs from Nina's unbearable pain and guilt, and from her incapability to forgive herself. The novel ultimately tackles questions connected with good and bad parenting, emphasizing how societal expectations are overtly imposed upon women.

The Elysium Testament starts on Halloween, contributing with its gothic spirit to the atmosphere of mystery and confusion that will govern the story.¹⁸ Nina is a grotto restorer who never wanted to settle or become a mother and never actually did adopt her husband's name after marriage. Her account is her testament for her successors, an 'appendix to my life' (O'Donnell 1999: 21), while she plans her suicide. In her attempt to rationalize such emotional distress, she gives careful thoughts to the different kinds of ways to die she could choose, imagines the news on the papers and even leaves instructions for her funeral; all these acts place the protagonist at a liminal mental balance. Her trauma, like that of Alice, rests on the power of the 'unspeakable' and on her inability to 'escape the tyranny of memory' (11) while, paradoxically, the fixation of trauma rests precisely in the incessant replaying of unconnected images and memories (van der Kolk and McFarlane 1996; Caruth 1996; Leys 2000: 2; LaCapra 2001). However, unlike Alice, Nina distrusts therapy. With the aid of her own private writing, which allows her to work through pain and grief, and of her close friend, the psychiatrist John Holmes, she attempts to come to terms with her past and to confront her future. At the same time that she professionally restores art to its original shape, she will end up reshaping her life into a renewed future. Interestingly, in *The Elysium Testament* as

18 For the employment of 'neo-gothic' elements in O'Donnell's novel, see Fogarty, who argues that they are used 'to reflect upon shifting and troubled understandings of the self, of the child, of the home, of mother-daughter relations, and of transgenerational bonds' (2000: 62).

much as in *Another Alice*, the skin is the place where pain is located, as both protagonists need to peel it off in order to initiate the healing process. If Alice used to take boiling baths after the repetitive rapes, when Nina loses her son, she experiences a 'rawness' that makes her wish she could be a reptile so as to be able to renew her skin: 'How can one be anything other than flesh-raw, when a child dies? The blood curses in your veins and mine' (20).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear how Nina's sorrow is complicated by a dysfunctional relationship with her daughter Elinore, who accuses her of selfishness and neglect in favour of her career. Unwilling to become a mother, although admitting that she was bewitched when she first saw her baby daughter, Nina's construction of the maternal is unsentimental and resentful; a position that contributes to her interrogation of societal constructions of gender roles. Her recollections of childbirth are dreadful: 'I would have done anything to push the forty-week-old parasite out of my body. In the middle of labour, I knew what fools women were, to yield to nature as often as they do' (O'Donnell 1999: 32). When years later she finds herself pregnant again, she settles an appointment with a hospital in London for an abortion and, after her husband begs her to return home, she is eventually unable to proceed with it. Her baffling decision to have the child knowing that '[e]verything in me resisted Roland' (54), only for the sake of her husband, makes matters worse, fracturing her marriage and widening their distance. A growing resentment, a lack of the mother bond and the diagnoses of the child's strange kind of affection enhances her guilt, which she judges as a punishment for not being a 'good mother' (54). The novel, thus, engages in the articulation of an alternative notion of the maternal, for Nina does not respond to societal expectations and is continually seen in contrast with other more conventional mothers.¹⁹ In this regard, Bernie, her cleaning lady, becomes a source of insecurity for her, since she has delivered four children through four caesarean sections

19 According to Fogarty, 'the heroine spawns a number of anti-selves, including her twin brother, her epileptic lover, and her changeling offspring. This gothic splitting of identity is elicited both by the dread of the bad mother and by the spectre of the child as alien' (2000: 78).

and very proudly shows her scars, while Nina recriminates herself for her inability to identify with such sacrificial act. In her diary, Nina translates her disabled mothering emotions into words:

You know what I really suspect, even after what we discovered, too late? That from the earliest moments, his [Roland] growing embryonic form sensed my distress. That during his delivery he heard me yell at the consultant to get the child out, to get him *out* or I would die. That my physical pain was also his. As every mother feels pain so does every child; unlike most children, he never forgot the memory of that suffocating journey down a tube which squashed his head, constricted his shoulders, then pressed his blind eyes hard into the soft sockets of his skull. (59)

However, if at the beginning of her journal Nina placed most of the blame on herself, she progressively claims shared responsibility. Through her writing, her husband comes full sight as an inattentive father. Being too busy, both parents fail to detect what was wrong with Roland, initially taking for granted that the origin of his disturbance was mental. In fact, it is only after his death when they finally go and see several doctors, who conclude that he had a syndrome connected to epilepsy. Besides, the two have extramarital affairs and turn to their work as shields from which to protect themselves against emptiness and disappointment. On one occasion, at a party, everyone witnesses how Roland is at the top of a tree, on a branch that is creaking, while he is suspended in the air. Neil then runs to the house, in shock, instead of towards the child, while Nina feels a mixture of love and fear for a child that might overpower her: 'that the great turbulent strength I had built in the empire of my own childhood, would perish in his presence. Without it, I would not know myself' (O'Donnell 1999: 148). It is Nina's lover and workmate, Ciaran, who suggests taking him to a neurologist because he might be affected by epilepsy, an illness he suffers himself. Additionally, on another occasion that she finds him levitating, she instigates Roland to tell her what he was at, and she shakes him so much that he faints. Episodes of this kind, with Nina being hard on him, keep repeating. She sometimes hits him until he bleeds, only to regain control a minute later and hold him, just like her own father did with her: 'I began to shake him. I could not stop and as I shook him I knew I was a bad and evil woman' (112).

Nina describes how, as a child, Roland was impenetrable, only emotionally open to her sister Elinore, eleven years older, with whom he developed a special bond and who, in turn, adopted the role of a surrogate mother, soothing him during his nightmarish nights and terrifying fits. However, such familiar dysfunction becomes so burdensome for Elinore that she decides to write a series of long letters to an advisor in the Sunday tabloids to whom she confides that her parents are always fighting over how to bring her little brother up and that her mother should be blamed for bringing so much trouble to the family. Elinore even reports her mother for the child's bruises and sore body:

Not the usual kind of abuse. But beatings. Lots of them. You'd never know to look at him, or at us. We're a normal enough looking family. We're not poor or anything and my parents could be okay if they didn't always fight about my brother and how to handle him. The thing is my dad has pulled back completely and does his work all the time. And my mum's no better. She works and works. I try to keep my brother away from her. (O'Donnell 1999: 205)

Taking for granted 'that all parents fuck up their children' (20), Nina's confrontation with her angry daughter inevitably prompts a hurtful recognition of her own alienation from a scolding father, who bullied her and her twin brother to swim into exhaustion in order to win medals.

The day Ronald died, Nina had agreed to take him to her grotto on the condition that he would not try to fly again or communicate with the 'other' Roland, who made him do weird things. It is a cruel irony of destiny that his appreciation for her work awakes her admiration for her son wishing she had been a more attentive, wiser and patient mother: 'There he was, my truest love, and only then did I see him as he was. He should have had unicorns with pearly horns as pets, he should have been raised by a knightly father and an honourable mother' (O'Donnell 1999: 185). It was an accident caused by a big crack in one of the stalactites what killed Roland. In those seconds that she was looking at the child, he did not even scream:

The expression on his face did not change, because he saw only me. He was complete, satisfied. He knew, in the short space of time that we'd been in the grotto, that something had changed between us, that he had won me, that I would always vanquish the enemy. With a loud crack it plummeted straight down, the full, lacerating weight

of monumental dagger which Ciaran and I had fashioned, the sharpest point all charm and glitter, nestling beneath it the deadly sliver of metal which split the child's skull wide like the shell of an egg. (195)

In spite of the harrowing scene, the text focuses on the peace and tenderness of his sudden death, at a precise moment when mother and child were sharing a blissful moment.

At the end of the novel, the narrative reveals how writing can heal pain through the release and verbalization of blocked emotions. Nina ultimately comes to realize that she does not want Neil to read her Testament. Instead, her friend John takes her to a river, where she goes through a purifying process that, like in the case of Alice, prompts her rebirth: 'The river waited, deep and grey and chattering. It called us, it has always called me' (O'Donnell 1999: 213). In spite of their shivering, as the action takes place in December, she proceeds with her ritual of immersing naked three times to complete the symbolic journey:

I called out to the rushing current. The grey, chill river. The pulse of something flowing out to infinity, washing me, cleansing me. I vanquished my enemies. I vanquished my one enemy. Not Roland, not my son the saint. But his pain, and all pain which is the incarnation of evil. We would not freeze to death. We were moving. We would keep moving in order to live. We would move to defy all darkness of spirit. What moves cannot freeze. (214)

Considering Nina's professional swimming skills developed in her childhood and her emotional relationship to water, the immersion in the river can be interpreted as an extended metaphor of the fluctuating state of her mind. To her, diving, feeling like drowning and then coming up to the surface used to embody her fatal attraction for the underworld and her instinctive need to return to life; precisely what she has done with the writing of her Testament and her eventual decision to live. The book ends with her voicing '*Blessed be Roland!* [sic]' in her last immersion, and the words written in capital letters 'THE BEGINNING' (214), which clearly mark an end to her grief, to her coming to terms with the loss of a son she once did not want and then did not know how to love until she lost him. Thus, the novel comes full cycle, with the ending going from death to rebirth. In this regard, both *Another Alice* and *The Elysium Testament* coincide in

the way they engage with the issue of problematic parenting and its psychosocial consequences. Either child abuse, perpetrated by the father, or child neglect, exerted by the mother, are showcased as opportunities for intergenerational change, which necessarily require a rebirth.

The 2000s: Anne Enright's The Gathering (2007) and Jennifer Johnston's Foolish Mortals (2007)

The first decade of the twenty-first century evinced the consequences of a fast and unprecedented economic boom, the so-called miracle of the Celtic Tiger, the phenomenon of immigration in a country of emigrants, the growth of multiculturalism and the eventual collapse of this economy; issues that have all received much critical attention in recent years.²⁰ Within this context, the family, as the repository of the values of society, has little by little lost prominence as a stable and fixed concept and has moved from its nuclear position in society to a more marginal orbit that rather gravitates around the choices of the individual, who often emerges in literature as the result of a faulty upbringing within a dysfunctional household. This is so because, in spite of the alterations, and the way the family has been scrutinized, questioned and unravelled, literature still relies on this icon as the mirror of the nation. As society has modernized, and women have gained rights, other (functional) family configurations have been added to include dual earner families, stepparent families, single parent families, househusband families, communal families, gay families, and even related and unrelated subfamilies sharing – literal or metaphorical – familiar spaces. Such phenomenon will emerge in Jennifer Johnston's novel, as I will have the opportunity to discuss in the following pages.

In this regard, *The Gathering* and *Foolish Mortals* are two good instances of the changes brought by the economic boom that transformed the country into what we now know as Celtic Tiger Ireland. Even though

²⁰ See, for instance, studies by Edna Longley and Declan Kiberd (2001), Bryan Fanning (2007), and Borbála Faragó and Moynagh Sullivan (2008).

they deal with apparently dissimilar subjects, both novels truly encapsulate the energizing powers of an era of plenitude and the society of plenty, while they problematize traditional forms of human relations in accordance to the new demands for the individual in a global society. Even though not all characters in the two novels could be said to have experienced the positive effects of such economic prosperity, affluence and the significance of false appearances acquire a more than relevant meaning. In *The Gathering*, the protagonist comments how she always felt guilty for having scaled to an upper-middle class life and how she felt uncomfortable when her brother visited her in her five-bedroom house, while *Foolish Mortals* makes a true display of luxurious cars, houses built in upmarket areas and even extravagant characters. Leisure activities also form part of the daily routine at the same time that the menacing presence of massive shopping centres constitute inseparable elements of the landscape of a mercantilist society, whose values are being challenged by the alternative demands of a fast-changing reality. In fact, in Johnston's novel, the protagonist sees the vast shopping centre as the symbol of the Celtic Tiger, of mass consumption and madness and even calls it a 'hell hole' (Johnston 2007: 226).

From the beginning of her literary career, Anne Enright's prose has been associated with experimental authors like Laurence Sterne, Flann O'Brien or even James Joyce, in detriment of the more realistic practice among the Irish women writers of her generation (Moloney 2003: 55–7; Meade 2008). Enright's fourth novel, *The Gathering*, brought to light the issue of child sexual abuse, which has now become topical in contemporary Irish literature, yet the author redresses it into a new form and invests it with further meaning. The aesthetic quality of *The Gathering* did not pass unnoticed by critics to the point of becoming the deserved recipient of the Booker Prize for literature (2007), in spite of previous reviews that had found the book too dark and dramatic (Barnacle 2007). Indeed, there is no doubt that the prose of this novel is sophisticated and innovative in ways that transcend the Irish literary canon (Dell'Amico 2010; Harte 2010; Bracken and Cahill 2011). Formally, as well as thematically, *The Gathering* can be interpreted as a hybrid text that blends elements more habitually ascribed to the female Irish gothic with others that are to be traced back to some Latin American writers of the magical realist

tradition. Her subversion of the frontiers between life and death, the way objects are animated while reality is suspended in a timeless realm, the contrast between the physical representation of sexuality and the spiritual dimension of characters, or even her transgression of a linear (un)reliable narrative and a rational plot are only some examples of the techniques that Enright exploits in this novel.

At a superficial level, *The Gathering* can be seen as a bleak but also comic story about such universal themes as life, love and death, while at a deeper level it becomes clear how it successfully discloses the devastating effects of trauma caused by child abuse, focusing not only on the troubled victim but also on the distressed next akin survivors. The title of the book sets the reader in the gathering of the Hegarty family, formed by the mother and her nine surviving children – out of twelve –, on the occasion of their brother Liam's wake. Nonetheless, the narrative continually moves backwards and forwards covering the time span of the life of three generations of members of the same (dysfunctional) family that will unveil traumas, lies, sexual obsessions, neglected love, pain and suffering; in sum, what the protagonist calls 'the Hegarty conundrum, the reason we were all so fucked up' (Enright 2007b: 85). In fact, as the novel progresses, family dysfunction emerges as the source and symptom of 'unnameable' experiences. As Liam Harte has argued, the novel exhibits 'its scrupulous refusal to redeem history by suggesting that the far-reaching effects of traumatic memory can be completely erased or transcended' (2010: 188).

The story is told by 39-years-old Veronica – Liam's closest sister, who was only 11 months her senior – a witness narrator whose motivation is to reconstruct a past that keeps haunting her, knowing that she holds no truths but uncertainties and flashes of a buried distress that she suspects was caused by 'a crime of the flesh' (Enright 2007b: 1). Ultimately, Veronica wants to make sense of his death and find out the reason for his alcoholism, which she suspects lies in something that happened to him during childhood when he stayed in his grandmother's house. This is an endeavour for which she resorts to her (un)reliable memory struggling to trace an undisclosed and unresolved past. It is important to mention here that, as referred above, the 1990s were significant years for the disclosure and all kinds of taboo subjects. The increase in public opinion and social responsibility

as regards such topics was prompted by the media coverage of all kinds of abuses, which exerted a liberating effect among the Irish people. The unearthing of buried traumas through the recovery of memory gave meaning to the necessary healing process, since victims felt for the first time that they had a story to tell. *The Gathering* in this regard makes a case of such important societal advance. Veronica's vital but sudden need to remember that something went wrong during her childhood is precisely triggered by the exposure of this kind of traumatic experiences on the news: 'I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio, [...] and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too' (173).

In the novel, Veronica's searching for a valid truth from an 'uncertain event' (Enright 2007b: 1), what Hugo Barnacle has termed 'the pretentious memory-as-illusion approach' (2007), involves both real and metaphorical journeys. On the one hand, she needs to travel Eastwards to England, to bring Liam's body back, and then to Ireland, for his burial. And, on the other, throughout her life, in her need to traverse a painful past full of unforgettable memories that threaten to challenge her balance. In Veronica's case, revisiting her past involves bringing all the silences and unutterable sentences to the surface; an action that will eventually enhance resentment towards the way she was brought up, unhappiness in her marriage and estrangement from her own daughters. Little by little, the novel will reveal how familiar functioning will be at the core of all other happenings and, furthermore, how motherhood will turn into a pivotal point around which familiar strains gravitate. Curiously, when recalling her mother, she focuses on the 'holes in her head [which] are not her fault' (7); a metaphor of emptiness that echoes Paula Spencer in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, caused by so many marital beatings. As Veronica reflects:

We pity our mothers, what they had to put up with in bed or in the kitchen, and we hate them or we worship them, but we always cry for them – at least I do. The imponderable pain of my mother, against which I have hardened my heart. Just one glass over the odd and I will thump the table, like the rest of them, and howl for her too. (185)

Veronica needs to remember because she feels responsible for what happened, knowing that she was an actual witness of the sexual abuse when she was only eight. But it is her mother the one she makes responsible for Liam's troubles, for her absence, negligence and lack of mothering resources: 'you were not there to comfort or protect him, and that interference was enough to send him on a path that ends in the box downstairs' (Enright 2007b: 213).²¹ To complicate things further, and to show how family dysfunction is interiorized and then projected onto generations in the form of an inherited legacy, the narrative will reveal in the end that it was Ada, the grandmother, the one to be blamed for all the family troubles. For that reason, Dell'Amico argues that Veronica 'sees what happened to Liam as Ada's failure to protect him and as a manifestation of Ada's more general and thoroughgoing failure. To Veronica, Ada is the source of a familial malaise, whose effects continue to blight her children and grandchildren to the present day' (2010: 61). Instances of recrimination, familiar blaming and bitterness towards nonverbal interiorized patterns of communication abound in the novel, as much as reflections on the influential power of the household for the wellbeing of the individual. As Veronica reflects: 'Family sins and family wounds, the endless pricking of something that we find hard to name. None of it is important, just the usual, *You ruined my life*, or *What about me?* [sic] because with the Hegartys a declaration of unhappiness is always a declaration of blame' (210).

Veronica's inner quest to come to terms with the burden of a secret that keeps reverberating in her mind involves a further process through which she folds into a magical tale of romance and fantasy that eases the search for a renewed identity. From a psychological perspective, the recovery of a history from a 'romantic place' (Enright 2007b: 13), which is haunted by intrusive images of the ghost of her brother, together with her incapability to remember with clarity of mind and her need to 'pick and choose the fact

21 Interestingly, Veronica's difficulties trying to evoke lucid images of her mother are expressed in terms of fluid metaphors, which fade and re-emergence simultaneously: 'Some days I don't remember my mother. I look at her photograph and she escapes me [...]. I find she has run through me like water' (3).

about ourselves' (162) represent an escape into an alternative realm. The invocation of this magical reality through the freeing of her subconscious is not governed by limits of space and time, or of reality and fantasy; it is rather the result of the protagonist's defence mechanism against pain. This explains how, in the novel, characters often seem to inhabit an extemporal reality in which present, past and future coalesce. In fact, the presence of Liam's body is so vivid that Veronica sometimes has to remind the reader that he is dead. And certainly, as the narrator certainly suggests, in the novel, '[w]hat is written for the future is written in the body, the rest is only spoor' (162–3). The result is, therefore, an unreliable narrative that has rested upon the inaccuracy of memory, as the opening clearly reveals: 'I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother's house when I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place' (1). Even though confusion governs the novel, it is at the end when the reader remains uncertain of whether to take Veronica's evaluation of the dynamics of her dysfunctional family at face value or as the result of her traumatized mind.²²

All in all, in *The Gathering*, as in previous cases already discussed in the present chapter, the recall of the past through the unfolding of (un)reliable memory functions as a performative healing process that conducts Veronica's grieving towards a search for self-discovery, recovery and acceptance. Like the protagonist of *The Elysium Testament*, Veronica needs to write down what happened to her, so that she can fix her memory into something that would make it more consistent. As Leys has explained, 'the victim is unable to recollect and integrate the hurtful experience in normal consciousness; instead, she is haunted or possessed by intrusive traumatic memories' (2000: 2). The result is a narrative that unveils uncomfortable truths about her family, including child molestation and neglect. This,

22 As Bridget English has contended, Veronica's lack of trust on her own memories is part of the author's further questioning of 'the reliability of historical narrative and of memory itself', that is she'll not be able to put an end to her inquest, leaving 'the evidence for his traumatic past [...] inconclusive' (2013: 206 and 207).

however, will give form and meaning to a distressed past, one in which her familiar interrelations were the main source of discomfort, including his brother's unsettled life and eventual suicide. The gathering of the family around Liam's absent body, which gives title to the novel, emerges thus as a metaphor of a disarranged assembly of members of the same household who share few memories of their individual pasts. For Veronica, the call of the gathering for the wake functions, however, as an a-wakening, for it gives her the opportunity to invoke the fragility of her distraught memory to revisit her life and confront her past; an action that eventually embarks her into a journey that involves reshaping her present and reinventing her future.

The second author that will be analysed in this section, Jennifer Johnston, offers a completely different picture. In this case, preconceptions about the traditional nuclear Irish family and of sexual conservatism are interrogated in favour of alternative ways of family unions in which homosexuality and divorce are normalized. Even though Johnston's narrative production is prolific and wide-ranging in subject matter and scope, the exploration of family dramas and decays seems to underlie the subplots of most of her novels. When *Foolish Mortals* (2007) was published, reviewers coincided in identifying the dysfunctional family as the issue that enabled the author to unveil the consequences of the collapse of outdated values triggered by Celtic Tiger times (Craig 2007; McClelland 2007). However, the concept of dysfunction that is here at stake differs from the sexual abuses and traumas that emerge in the novels discussed above. While on the one hand it serves to challenge Catholic morality reversing the equation between the traditional nuclear heterosexual family and social valid norms, on the other, it deepens into alternative malfunctioning relations that surface as products of modern liberal times. Johnston's novel, thus, offers a crude portrayal of a 'comically amorphous' (Meaney 2010: xiii) family, who has to come to terms with unexpected re-unions that include alternative sexual orientations and the disclosure of secrets buried in a distant past that need to be revisited.

Set in the 1990s, the same decade as Enright's novel, *Foolish Mortals* gravitates around the dynamics and intricacies of a non-conventional family, through which the reader has the opportunity to envision the contradictions of a modern society. In this novel, gay and cross-sexual practices coexist

with domesticated women, who are more subordinate to ex-husband and children and more invisible than ever.²³ The protagonist, Harry, is lying in hospital, badly injured and trying to recover from a car accident, apparently provoked by his second wife, Charlotte. During his convalescence, his first wife, Stephanie, assists him taking on her shoulders 'the role of next of kin' (Johnston 2007: 13), since his mother and brother only pay visits occasionally, and his own estranged children are reluctant to see him. In the course of his recovery from partial amnesia, Harry discovers that he was involved in an extra-marital affair with a man – who is in fact his brother-in-law, his first wife's twin – which is apparently the reason why Charlotte tried to kill him but ended killing herself. The theme of memory and forgetting once again connects this novel with the preceding ones and emerges here at the forefront as Henry is telling his own story in the first person, while the rest of the narrative is presented from the third, affecting tone and perception. In addition, cross-dressings games of twins, confusions of sexual identities and the eccentricities of a 'monstrous' mother,²⁴ who drinks up her guilt and isolation, constitute key motives around which patterns of dysfunction will keep appearing. In terms of the construction of the family itself, unbalance seems to govern the lives of the characters. Thus, Stephanie compares the rage and passion of his ex-husband's family to the '*undemonstrative lives, courteous, calm and affectionate* [sic]' lives that her parents held (67). As Patricia Craig has argued: 'Part of the author's

23 As Meaney has argued commenting on Johnston's novels: 'Her families are allegories of the nation in general and very particular in their miseries – and joys' (210: xi).

24 Henry describes his mother as close to a predator, '*scorpion, a gorilla, and angry Indian tiger looking for prey. I don't want to be eaten by my own mother* [sic]' (Johnston 2007: 67). The portrayal of Tash as a monstrous mother connects with other writers of the Big House genre, such as Molly Keane, which Vera Kreilkamp interprets as 'the final collapse of a male-dominated ascendancy culture in the postcolonial era. Moving into the void created by politically and economically emasculated fathers and husbands, twentieth-century Big House women spend their voracious energies and appetites by decorating their homes, snubbing their social inferiors, or torturing their children' (1998: 185).

achievement here is to undermine, with her customary elliptical deftness, conventional ideas about family relations and activities' (2007).

In tone with most novels analysed in this chapter, the disclosure of family secrets appears as the underlying motive for the development of the plot. Harry's discovery that he was having a relationship with both his second wife and his brother-in-law utterly confuses him. His consciousness, half-lucid and half-muddled, is a central focus of attention, as he drifts from what he needs to remember and what he wants to forget. The unsuccessful struggle to recover his past threatens his balance to such an extent that, when he leaves hospital and tries to resume the life he shared with Jeremy, seeing that he is not able to re-connect with anything, he considers committing suicide: 'How can I continue to live without my past?' (Johnston 2007: 160). It is through the revelation of a dream how he concedes to be caught in the prisons of three families: his own, characterized by the neglect of his mother; the one he formed with Stephanie, which served to fulfil societal expectations; and his new homosexual relationship with Jeremy. Henry's entrapment in contradiction could be interpreted in this regard as the failure of society to normalize alternative sexual orientations. As he tells Jeremy: 'Once upon a time I was whole and happy, I thought; no broken bones, no mind misted with forgetfulness, my children loved me. I was normal' (192). Such notion of normalcy, to which the protagonist refers twice and even appears in the text with a capital 'N', is paramount since it epitomizes the conservative equation between heterosexual relations and nuclear families. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that he only married Stephanie to keep up appearances, to normalize the 'anomalous' homosexual orientation of his adolescence. In fact, in a significant moment at the end of the novel, Stephanie announces George that Henry and Jeremy are happy together, and his brother replies that it was: 'About bloody time. How splendidly dysfunctional you've all become' (209).

The challenge to sexual conservatism is conveyed in different ways in the novel, although without much success. Transvestism is presented as a game the twins used to enjoy and it functions as a symbol of the changes occurring in the New Ireland. However, the issue of inappropriate upbringing is also inevitably linked to it. While Stephanie recalls how the twins enjoyed confusing people through cross-dressing, she adds

that they were encouraged by their parents, who found such witty game charming and enjoyable. As Jeremy reflects further in his life: 'We loved it. We loved fooling people and not getting punished for it. The older we got the more we loved it. We weren't bad, just badly brought up. We enjoyed pulling the wool over people's eyes. Sometimes we even managed to fool our parents. That really annoyed them, but they had taught us to do it, so they couldn't be too angry with us.' (Johnston 2007: 193). Paradoxically, Stephanie cannot come to terms with the idea of her ex-husband and son being gay, wonders where she went wrong and holds the hope that it will be a passing thing. Furthermore, as a true representative of the outdated values of patriarchy, her domestication and dependence make her act as if no divorce had occurred. Even though she works as a writer, the space she occupies in the text is limited to the kitchen, to tidying up or to minding her family. In a parallel scene to Henry's, she addresses her daughter Ciara looking for the comfort that her idea of normalcy would confirm:

'Will you be normal when you grow up? Please be normal. One normal person in the family would make me so happy.'

'What's normal?'

'I thought I knew. But I was wrong. All the way.'

Ciara stopped her little dance and went over to her mother. She put her arms around her, hugged her.

'What's normal?' She whispered again in her mother's ears.

'You must be. For me.' She pushed herself away from her daughter and went over to the cooker. Saucepans were bubbling and clicking. 'You must get married and have babies and live in a neat house. That's normal. That's what I want you to do.' (Johnston 2007: 214).

In *Foolish Mortals*, gender, sexuality and identity are interconnected issues that need to be renewed. In fact, according to Craig: 'Part of Johnston's plan is to point up the discrepancy between instinctive parental pangs and sensible liberal precepts, in present-day, cosmopolitan Dublin' (2007). In this regard, it is worth noting how the perception of change brought by modern times governs the narrative. Nothing is permanent any more: Stephanie's belief in her marriage 'till death us do part' (122); Harry's love for Charlotte, which belongs to a past that he cannot remember; Tash's inability to accept her incipient dementia and an arthritis that incapacitates her to

paint; or even sexual orientation, which is not believed to be genetically programmed any more. In this new Ireland of transformed values, everything is in a constant flux and characters need to struggle to accommodate to a new reality. Such vagaries are embodied in the text in the idea of affluence, symbolized by the massive shopping centre built in Dundrum. When Jerry takes Henry after he is recovered, he finds the experience insane, as there are too many people coming and going, too much noise and an excess of lights. The lack of connection he feels with such a place, as a result of his amnesia, allows him to look at Ireland as if he had woken up in a different country with which he cannot reconcile. Furthermore, Johnston's critique to the new order and to an idea of progress where everything is more individual, depersonalized and dehumanized is again seen from the point of view of George, an outsider who has come to Ireland after many years in Canada and who notices that nothing is the same:

'God, but his place has changed, flats, offices, almost skyscrapers. And whatever happened to that cinema?'

'It's progress, darling. You have it in Toronto too, I'm sure, P.R.O.G.R.E.S.S. it's all over the place.'

'I remember that cinema so well. Tash used to take us to see the most unsuitable films. What was it called?'

'The Pavilion. It's a block of flats now, three or four restaurants, several pretty grim shops and a theatre.'

'Oh man!' (Johnston 2007: 285–6)

All in all, Johnston's novel comes to suggest that the Celtic Tiger phenomenon triggered not only Ireland's economic growth and openness to foreign influence but also a renewed construction of the role of the individual in society and of his/her gender and sexual identity. As a result, the traditional notion of the Irish nuclear family seems to have been displaced in favour of other alternative configurations. However, Johnston's critique of neo-liberal values is eventually revealed through the dysfunctions of an unusual family and the way they deal with new values and choices. The society depicted in the novel is the product of the global economy brought by the Celtic Tiger phenomenon within which the family, as a metaphor for the nation, is turned into a changing influx of ideals, governed by confusion and unresolved paradoxes. In this regard, Gerardine Meaney has noted that Johnston's consistent

focus on decay has not changed throughout her long literary career, even though it traces decades of Irish history, since 'her primary focus has been on the fabric of ordinary lives lived, for the most part, rather quietly. While her fiction began chronicling decaying big houses shipwrecked by history, her milieu has predominantly been the same small house' (2010: xi). What the novel finally comes to suggest is that in an age of globalization, connection among individuals seems more urgent than ever. Thus, in the two novels analysed, female characters emerge as the products and the effects of transformations brought by a globalizing world in which moral values, as much as economic and social changes, are challenged by alternative ways of understanding the individual experience.

The 2010s: Claire Keegan's Foster (2010) and Nuala Ni Chonchúir's You (2010)

Childhood has figured prominently in the texts discussed throughout these pages, usually in the form of an unresolved past recalled by an adult who needs to come to terms with a problematic present. As Dell'Amico has affirmed, 'an invocation of the child abuse [...] has been shown to have been commonplace in post-Independence Ireland, [...] which, in conjunction with discoveries of other histories of neglect, fractured the country's self-understanding on the cusp of and during the recent economic boom' (2010: 59). Nevertheless, even though in novels that deal with family dysfunction such early stage in life is usually the repository of frustrated and alienating experiences, few narratives are focalized by child narrators, as their limited perspectives confer a different dimension to the resulting deficits, often contributing to more uplifting endings. In this regard, it is worth noticing that in 2009 the editors of the journal *Éire-Ireland* dedicated a special issue to the literature and history of Irish childhood, arguing that 'the story of contemporary Irish society, a story that many claim signals unprecedented social and economic transformation, is a narrative with the child as its central trope' (Luddy and Smith 2009: 6). Likewise, Harte is even more explicit, when he affirms that there is a 'plethora of recent films, plays, art works, and autobiographies that anatomize Irish childhoods from plural perspectives

to the litany of child abuse scandals – and their systematic concealment – involving church and state-run institutions that have attracted a torrent of media attention since the mid-1990s' (2010: 187). Additionally, Vivian Valvano has recently suggested that 'critical examination of the child or childhood in an Irish context has been remarkably slow to appear' (2015: 131). With the intention of correcting such an imbalance, the two women writers included in this last section, devoted to the literary production of the first decade of the twenty-first century, have been selected precisely because children are the agentive voices of the narrations and have a story to tell as members of malfunctioning households.

If there is a writer who stands out for her consistent portrayal of the family unit as dysfunctional, fractured, miserable or emotionally empty, that is Claire Keegan.²⁵ Even though her production is not extensive, consisting mainly on two collection of short stories and a novella,²⁶ in the last decade, she has turned into one of the most celebrated writers of her generation. Her remarkable literary gifts and her masterful use of the short story form have been compared to those of John McGahern, Flannery O'Connor, Anthony Chéjov, Benedict Kiely, Raymond Carver, James Joyce or William Trevor (Enright 2007a; Newton 2008; Pierce 2008; and D'hoker 2013). Her prose has also been praised for the frank and bitter portrayal of unequal gender relations, whose out-dated values, no matter how anchored in the past might be, still prevail in the modern context of her fictional world (Keegan 2007; O'Hagan 2010). Within this framework, it is her unsympathetic views on the institutionalization of marriage as the representative icon of the family where the main targets of her harsh criticism should be placed. Bearing these assumptions in mind, the analysis of Keegan's novella *Foster* (2010) revolves around the construction of

family dysfunction in the context of the temporal fostering of a child.²⁷ In this narrative, the young protagonist turns into a commodity that can be exchanged for basic needs, as the negligible role of parenting is reduced to that of mere procurers for food and shelter.

Intentionally omitting details of place and time, except for a passing allusion to the hunger strikes of the North – which sets the novella around 1981 – such fabricated timeless reality has the effect of enhancing its universal dimension. Besides, the nameless protagonist and the lack of references to other locations sets the narration worlds apart from the emergent economic growth and the socio-cultural changes that were starting to spring up in Ireland. As Sean O'Hagan has commented, 'it seems, in its depiction of the slow rhythms of rural life, to take place in a much older Ireland' (2010). Interestingly, Keegan's work is a product of the last decade of the twentieth century, at a time when Irish society had started to contest conservative views on the role of women, motherhood, homosexuality, divorce and the traditional nuclear family. Therefore, it is startling to notice how her narrative dwells on issues apparently outdone by writers of her generation, especially if we accept Jennifer M. Jeffers' contention that fiction produced throughout the 1990s was mainly involved in exploring 'the body as it is linked to a grid of power that is partly pre-established and partly rapidly changing in contemporary Ireland [...] the demarcating line of identity – that perennial Irish problem – can be gauged at the basic level of sexual and gender identity in contrast to or in alliance with political, social, religious, or cultural norms' (2002: 1). To answer such apparent anachronism, Keegan has argued in an interview that a lot of Irish women still think from the perspective of men and that, therefore, this is the world she portrays in her fiction (Morales-Ladrón 2011).

25 Her work has been acclaimed internationally and has been awarded many literary prizes, including the William Trevor Prize, the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature, the Olive Cook Award, the Edge Hill Prize for Short Stories, the Martin Healy Prize, and the Davy Byrnes Irish Writing Award, among some others.

26 Keegan is also the author of the less known short story 'Salt: The Second Chapter' (2002), published independently.

27 Although *Foster* has been published as a stand-alone text, Keegan prefers to describe it as a 'long short story', arguing that it does not have the pace of a novella (O'Hagan 2010; D'hoker 2013: 201). Originally, 'Foster' was published in *The New Yorker* and attracted so much attention after it won the Davy Byrnes Irish Writing Award that John Ford advised her to rewrite and expand it until it turned into a longer and more complex narrative which relates much more to the form of a novella.

As the title of *Foster* suggests, the plot delves into the fostering of a girl by a childless couple – relatives of her mother – while her parents are too busy with work in summertime and her mother is getting ready to give birth again. Keegan's ironic contention here as regards the reasons of such large family to separate from their own daughter, while they are making room for another child, is blatant, suggesting that this pattern might keep repeating. Her critique of societal expectations and patriarchal demands on married couples to have children is in fact the source of much distress in the narration. While the girl's parents, who are emotionally unconnected, are so fertile that they cannot have the time, space or basic means to properly bring their children up, the fostering family, the Kinsellas, being warmer and more generous, are afflicted by trauma. The dramatic death of their only child soon figures as the motivation behind their need to adopt the girl, hoping in turn to overcome grief and loneliness. In the two cases, the protagonist is symbolically placed at the vortex of two triangles that struggle to keep an unfeasible balance. By naming the girl's biological mother Mary, the symbol of the mother of us all, the author is further pointing at the failure of religious predicaments to justify the validity of the hegemonic nuclear family. At a poignant moment in the narration, the protagonist overhears her parents discussing the length of her stay: 'How long should they keep her?', the mother asks, to which the father answers: 'Can't they keep her as long as they like?' (Keegan 2010: 9). Although it will come to an end when school starts, his father drops her at the Kinsellas uninformed and at such a rush that he even forgets her suitcase: 'Why did he leave without so much as a good-bye, without ever mentioning that he would come back for me?' (15).

In Keegan's literary universe, family detachment is commonplace, with adults lacking the necessary social skills to properly interact or to share and express emotions, and children struggling to grow amidst damaged households and menacing environments. Families are constructed as sites of conflict, inequality and even sometimes violence. According to Valvano, 'parents are abhorrent. Her indictments of her adult perpetrators may be subtly presented but they are uncompromising. Keegan unearths the damage wrought by toxic parents in her finely tuned use of elliptical narration and in careful disclosures of aspects of the consciousness of her

protagonists' (2015: 132). In Keegan's fiction, characters very rarely touch and couples have no sense of intimacy,²⁸ an emotional disability that even the young protagonist of *Foster* is able to detect. When she is walking around the new house, she is glad to see that the childless Kinsellas sleep together in a big double bed, unlike her parents, who never touch but paradoxically keep making babies. As the author has declared, 'I don't trust that home is necessarily where one finds one's happiness. Families can be awful places, just as they can be glorious and loving. Also, I'm very interested in what we can do without' (O'Hagan 2010).

Thus, family exchange turns into an enriching experience for the girl, as the Kinsellas prove to be one of the few decent couples in Keegan's universe. In fact, the focalization of the story from the point of view of the child, who has a limited knowledge of reality, allows the two families to be inevitably set for comparison and contrast, eventually triggering the girl's awakening process. Initiating a journey into an unknown world of prospects and alternatives, she soon discovers how households are microcosms that open up different realms in which nothing can be taken for granted: 'this is a different type of house. Here there is room, and time to think. There may even be money to spare' (Keegan 2010: 13). Eventually, what the Kinsellas offer her is not material but emotional support, care and nurture, which are exhibited as part of the routine of a genuine family. Completely aware of the differences, drinking fresh water from the well, she reflects: 'The sun, at a slant now, throws a rippled version of how we look back at us. For a moment, I am afraid. I wait until I see myself not as I was when I arrived, looking like a tinker's child, but as I am now, clean, in different clothes, with the woman behind me [...]. I drink six measures of water and wish, for now, that this place without shame or secrets could be my home' (23–4).

Differently from previous novels already discussed in this chapter, in *Foster* the unspeakable trauma that needs to be unveiled is not located in the child, but in the fostering couple, who is wounded by the unresolved loss of their only son. Incapable of informing the girl of their grief and subsequent

28 In many stories compiled in *Antarctica* (1999) and *Walk the Blue Fields* (2007) couples often sleep in different beds and sex figures as the result of a mere instinct and need.

need to mind her, they choose to interact with pain through silence. This involves the keeping of secrets, even though Mr Kinsella assures the girl that there are no secrets in the house because they are shameful. However, their inability to unblock emotions through language is passed on to the girl, who soon transforms such impediment into the discovery that there is a form of human bonding that exists beyond words. When Mrs Kinsella gives her a bath, she feels that '[h]er hands are like my mother's hands but there is something else in them too, something I have never felt before and have no name for. I feel at such a loss for words but this is a new place, and new words are needed' (Keegan 2010: 18). Eventually, her awakening process will involve an insightful awareness into how language can sometimes defy reality, how there are experiences that cannot be explained through words. She has been able to read into their pain and to ease it by way of listening to unheard signals. At the end of the novel, when she returns home, her mother and sisters admire her new clothes and find that she has changed: 'My sisters look at me as though like I'm an English cousin' (81). However, as a true apprentice of the value of the eloquence of silence and the keeping of secrets, she remains voiceless; her reservation, a sanctuary that will protect her from her own strange biological family.

With another nameless child as the protagonist of her own account, Nuala Ní Chonchúir's debut novel *You* also stands out. Characterized by a wide-ranging literary production that includes novels, short stories, poetry, flash fiction and essays, the talented award-winning Ní Chonchúir's literary accomplishments keep mounting. Critical response to *You* was very positive, highlighting its innovative and experimental form, based on the uncommon use of the second-person narrative from which the story is told (Leonard 2010; Wallace 2010; White 2011). The novel, as the author has acknowledged, was inspired by the reading of her childhood diaries, and the location of the house by the river was inspired by her own home in Palmerstown, Co. Dublin (Ní Chonchúir 2013).²⁹ Similar to Keegan's

29 In fact, she has affirmed that: 'The narrator in *You* is a version of the 10-year-old me: she is a bookish, dreamy, analytical, inward looking child – very internal in her approach to life – but sharp in her own way. She's sensitive and crabby. That is the child that I was' (Ní Chonchúir 2013).

novel, the setting is never explicitly stated, although contextual references to Kate Bush, the Olympics in Moscow, the film *The Elephant man* and Nadia Comaneci place it in the same decade of the 1980s. From, yet again, an introspective perspective, the plot revolves around the dynamics of a dysfunctional family, ruled – often misruled – by a lone mother. It is narrated by an unnamed 10-year-old girl, constantly addressing an implied reader in the form of a 'you', a device that contributes to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Being the eldest, she is expected to mind her two younger brothers while she is also looking after her troubled mother. In addition, she is trying to come to terms with his father's second family arrangement, who has another partner and two more children. Torn between the two households, and assuming responsibilities that outstrip her, she moreover has to face how her baby brother drowns into a river, after her mother had asked her to mind him while she was spending the weekend with her new lover. Grief, however, unites the two families in an uplifting ending that presages a better outcome for the young protagonist.³⁰

Even though the context of *You* is more problematic than that of previous novels already discussed, the tone of the narration and the perspective from which it is told has the effect of softening its impact on the reader. The demanding mother who shouts the children 'so much that you could see frothy bits at the side of her mouth' (Ní Chonchúir 2010: 3), can only see in her daughter an inappropriate sense of responsibility and clumsiness. Addressing her as 'Miss Prim' (38), the girl, however, emerges as a sensible and extremely sensitive child, ill-fitted for that environment: 'Then you are stuck minding the baby and can't go out to hang around with Gwen, who'll be leaving any day now. The baby doesn't want to do anything you want to do and he cries until his whole face is full of snots and he's all sweaty and hot. Sometimes you feel sorry for him, but other times you just think he's a pain' (14). Through the interiorization and ensuing normalization of such

30 The author has explained that the idea for the novel originated in her short story, 'Anything stranger or startling', included in her first collection *The Wind Across the Grass* (2004), because she wanted to expand on the theme of a girl who acts as the little mother to the family (Morales-Ladrón 2014: 131–2).

hard daily life, the girl's frustrations, hopes and desires do not pass unnoticed by the adult reader, who can look into the burden she bears, mothering her two younger brothers and her distressed mother, who drinks heavily, has a history of failed relationships with men, has gone through several mental breakdowns and has even attempted suicide. However, while the child learns to deal with such a frenzied household, she also feels that she is strengthened by the soothing power she invests in the river, whose current flows beside her house and nurtures her: 'You love looking out at the water and you think that you live in the best house in the world [...]. It's the most special one because it's built right on the river; nearly in it' (85).

As a true mother figure, her childhood is anomalous and so evident to her that she frequently reflects on how the happier families in the neighbourhood do now allow their children to come near her house, which has been singled out as odd, chaotic and dysfunctional. On the one hand, the novel displays how the girl has wrongly associated the nuclear family with righteousness, while the author has clarified that: 'I wanted to show that peculiar kind of Irish snobbery. The novel is set in 1980 and people who were separated, were very much noticed and frowned upon then. Joan was a single parent family, even though she was separated, but she was on her own and her third child was from a different relationship. So, all these are issues that get visited upon the child'. On the other, the notion of being different to the norm is an additional form of stress for them, as the children at school and even the parents of her friends also discriminate her on grounds that her mother was in a 'loony bin' (Ní Chonchúir 2010: 23), intensifying her alienation from family, neighbours and friends:

Some of the kids from the street are playing around outside when you come out into the sunshine. They all stop what they are doing and stand and gawk at you. You know every single one of them, but only one girl says hello. You say hello back, but you feel like you're from another planet now and that they're right to stare at you. Your da guides you and Liam onto the path that leads to Cora's house. The river sighs behind you (129).

Her father's home is an even worse alternative, as her brother Liam and herself have been further displaced by a recent familiar re-arrangement that involves a new partner who rejects them and 'another half-brother or

sister to add to the list' (Ní Chonchúir 2010: 19). He lives physically and emotionally far away, in a small apartment located in an urban environment that she finds suffocating. She in fact perceives the unsafe streets, the roughness of the children in the neighbourhood area, the heat and the loud noises of the airplanes as toxic. Nonetheless, back home, the protagonist will have to face yet another drama. When her mother asks her to mind her baby brother so that she can have time for herself with her new lover, she takes a day out in the river with close family friends and an accident makes the baby fall into the river and drown. Thus, her coming-of-age narration involves the confrontation of her initial naiveté and extreme confidence, enabling her to experience the threat of the river, her metaphoric home: 'For the first time ever you felt afraid of the water; it looked black and angry, and you thought you could see whirlpools turning on it' (119).

Amidst such distressed reality, she also muses with the idea of her mother being dead, so that the children would be taken to an orphanage and then adopted by a rich family. Fantasizing and escaping to other places turns into a common resource of her imagination, wishing she could be somebody else. Thus, when her friend Gwen announces that her family is moving to Wales, she makes up an uncle in Washington and tells her that they are also going there to live. Trapped in her own reality, her eventual dislocation from both mother and father and the lack of a real nurturing place that might meet the needs of the children will trigger her need to escape and to follow her friend to Wales, assuming that happiness will be there. Her dangerous escapade with her little brother in a journey across the sea, however, offers her a world of possibilities, starting with their meeting of an old woman who mentors them and functions as a surrogate, if only momentous, mother, until they arrive to the more functional and satisfying household where her friend lives. Nevertheless, as the author has explained: 'She is striving for the normalcy that she sees in others people's families. They all look so happy. I mean, little knowing of course, that other families are not probably that happy [...]. Her drastic solution is to run away, which is a sort of a typical child solution [...] not knowing that they are putting themselves in possibly even further danger' (Morales-Ladrón 2014: 133).

For any family, coming to terms with death and loss, especially that of an infant child, can be one of the most challenging and stressful experiences they can go through. The effects of this dramatic event in the development of the plot become immensely important as the family also grows and unites in a moment of great distress. Even her father announces that from that moment on the girl and Liam will spend every other weekend with him, so that her mother will have a break and they will have the opportunity of relating to the rest of the family. The loss of her baby brother and the construction of a positive concept of home once she has experienced what it is to be homeless are two events that change the course of the narration. The novel ends with an uplifting note, the image of the girl looking through the window so that she can see the river, at a moment when her mother is also ready to embrace her:

The kitchen door opens, so you pop your head back in front watching the river to see who's there.

It's your ma. She folds her arms and smiles at you, so you smile back. You think she looks happy to see you. You're certainly happy to see her. (Ní Chonchúir 186)

Although initially the girl was caught in between two families, at the end, the two households seem to bridge the gap and get together in a multi-family reunion that changes the tone of the novel, since their sharing of the loss also symbolizes their coming to terms with their differences.

In the two coming-of-age novels of this last section, two nameless girl narrators of similar ages introspectively reflect on the world of adults and on how families are microcosms of multifarious forms of human interaction. Investing the narrations with a universal quality, the two authors, Keegan and Ní Chonchúir, offer poignant critiques of an Irish society that does not conform with traditional values as regards the different constructions of the term family. Although both narratives have the effect of offering timeless realms, even though they are set in the 1980s, they capture the modernizing progress of the nation itself, transformed from a country with a rural economy, to a more urban, secular, global and prosperous one, in which the construction of family life offers alternatives to the traditional nuclear option. In these cases, the protagonists end wiser and more knowledgeable about a world of adults that they will in turn be able to contest offering more positive choices for family bonding.

Conclusion

Tracing four decades of women's writing with a view to probe how female voices have dealt with the commonplace issue of the Irish family has revealed patterns of confrontation with the male discourses from the past. The need to bring to light silenced taboo subjects, uncomfortable dilemmas and hidden agendas has transformed the cultural significance of the novel into a site where societal demands have overlapped with the interest to unearth the silenced gaps of history. The portrayal of the Irish Catholic (nuclear) family conveyed in a variety of writers and novels has enhanced the examination of its symbolic function within the ideological formation of the nation. Following sociologist Debora Chambers, the nuclear family is a phenomenon that has always existed and will always exist, if only as myth and symbol that societies construct, 'a regulatory force that [...] structures emotions, modes of official knowledge, bodies, identities and definitions of public and private cultural space' (2001: 1). Within the Irish context, as it was defined by the Constitution and has already been stated, the family pertained to one kind: that formed by a man – the bread-winner – and a woman – sole responsible for the domestic chores – and the children. Such nucleus established itself as the centre around which all other institutions gravitated in order to preserve Catholic moral and ethical values. Within such normative regulation, disguised as a protectionist policy, the structure of a hierarchy of power could be maintained, perpetuating patriarchal values that were kept alive through the implementation of laws – including the Marriage Bar, the criminalization of homosexuality or the ban on divorce and abortion – until as late as the 1990s, when more liberal policies were introduced.

As a form of resistance to these predicaments, Irish literature has turned into a vehicle through which the ideological ethos of the State could be subverted. In fact, the family has often been pictured as a space of conflict, denial, disempowerment and lack of emotional growth. Therefore, stories of concealments, secrets, lies or unspeakable concerns have rather made of dysfunction a sign of identity of an institution sanctioned by the State and Church. Considering that the family has historically oppressed women in a

number of different ways, this chapter has tried to explore how such caged reality that maintained all kinds of inequalities has been opened to the fore by women writers, who have searched for alternative means with which to transgress it. Thus, the present study of dysfunctional family portrayals in contemporary Irish literature written by women has demonstrated that interest in unearthing and discussing taboo subjects, unbalanced relationships, different forms of sexual abuse and entrapment within the family lock has been paramount and in demand of detailed attention. Throughout the survey of the eight authors and novels discussed, which exemplify four decades of Irish writing, one can conclude arguing that societal demands have been mainly unearthed by literary voices that have engaged in the revision of ideologies that trapped women not only in the domestic sphere but in narrow, silent spaces.

In many of these narratives, the identities of female characters appear fragmented or debilitated, as a result of their wounded selves and their often wronged upbringings. In such cases, dysfunction has been defined by life-shaping experiences, including abuse, sexual assault or emotional deficits that have had an undoubted effect on how these characters have made sense of their world, to the extent of even in some cases challenging their mental balance and well-being. If, as Beale has suggested: 'The ideology of the family functions to support male-dominated hierarchies, and is another source of continuing oppression for women' (1987: 190), through the visualization of different forms of dysfunction, the texts discussed succeed in destabilizing the construction of the traditional (nuclear) family as an organic whole, which has subsequently been replaced by alternative forms of family bonding. Furthermore, in these novels, the notions of remembering and forgetting have been invoked to precisely debunk traditional ways of understanding motherhood, household patterns and familiar expectations based on female subservience and domesticity. Thus, placing female fictions as case studies has served to historicize social and ethical changes occurring in Ireland. What the reading of all these texts reveals is that, in contrast with much critical assumption about the changes brought by Celtic Tiger times, the dysfunctional Irish family is not a new phenomenon of the last forty years, but a sign of identity of much of the literature published in Ireland in previous decades.

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